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'Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History (review)' by [Martin Paul Eve](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#).

David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 250pp., \$24.95

Simon de Bourcier, *Pynchon and Relativity: Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels* (London: Continuum, 2012), 231pp., £60

In the introduction to his *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*, one of the earliest, and most respected, of Pynchon's critics, David Cowart, suggests that "few will read [this] present effort straight through" (p. xiii). Given the ever-expanding field of Pynchon criticism, alongside Cowart's inherently readable style, this may well be disingenuous. Indeed, the past year and a half alone has seen three collections go to print: *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, Rodopi's *Against the Grain* and *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*. There are no signs of slowdown, either. As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *V.* and the 40<sup>th</sup> of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Simon de Bourcier has just released *Pynchon and Relativity*, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée are about to publish their *Profils Americain* Pynchon volume and, alongside *Pynchon Notes*, the new electronic open-access serial *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon* is launching its first issue.

This critical proliferation may seem a formidable "knotting into", as Pynchon might put it, but it is actually more akin to a community effort; as the editors of the Cambridge Companion note, Pynchon's writings, in their infamous complexity, bind readers and critics together. As examples of

the diverse forms that Pynchon criticism has taken over the past forty-five years, though, Cowart and de Bourcier's volumes stand as exemplars. The former, as shall be seen, caters to a variety of audiences, but could broadly be described as a synoptic sweep, giving a well-informed, yet nonetheless perspectivized, take on Pynchon's entire canon. The latter, a dense theoretical work, contributes a rigorous, particularized study of narrative time to the field through Einstein's theory of Relativity within a specific subset of Pynchon's works. The critical ecosystem needs both of these archetypal works and they function symbiotically. They do seem, however, to fulfil somewhat different roles.

To move, then, to David Cowart's book, it is fair to say that while readers should not expect a radical departure from Cowart's previous scholarship, the foremost virtue of *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* lies in its aforementioned ability to provide for multiple audiences. Through a hybrid structure that attempts a textual chronology, interspersed with thematic chapters, Cowart is simultaneously able to provide for newcomers – for instance, in his admirable de-obfuscation of the avatars of V. in *V.* (pp. 41-42) – while also using brackets such as “The California Novels” to explore historical and theoretical concerns, in much the same way as Sam Thomas' 2008 *Pynchon and the Political*. Indeed, it is from this structure that Cowart's primary thesis emerges: “Thomas Pynchon merits recognition as America's greatest historical novelist” (p. 24).

Beginning with Pynchon's short stories, it is to “Entropy” that Cowart devotes the greatest space. Focusing upon the musical metaphors in this work brings a new take to an otherwise tired theme and appears to rescue this trope from its already overdone contexts, re-situating it between the competing narratives of historical alterity and the exhaustion of the modernist paradigm (p. 39). As would be expected, Cowart's reading of entropy does still veer towards a doom-laden foretelling of “the void that awaits” (p. 51), but in this instance Cowart, in parallel to Pynchon, ties *V.*'s

determined historical politics to their correlative, universally-grandiose figures and also to the publication contexts of Pynchon's early work; twenty years after World War II. Cowart's Pynchon is not, though, no matter how much he foretells, nihilistic; the reading here presents an author who “deplores our century's tendency towards the ideological promotion of what in *The Crying of Lot 49* he [Pynchon] calls 'the irreversible process'” (p. 53), an author “of profound humanism, decidedly at odds with [...] alleged postmodern nihilism” (p. 54).

Of even greater significance is Cowart's reassessment of Pynchon's trajectory, recategorised here as “a German period, a post-German period, and a neo-continental or global period” (p. 59). In fact, in its appraisal of the shifting importance of German culture in Pynchon's work, *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* firmly places Cowart in the realms of the political and the ethical. A key instance of this is the assuredness with which Cowart now begins to situate the heritage of German idealism as a target of Pynchon's critique, rather than as merely a depiction of reality. This departure from *The Art of Allusion* [1980], Cowart's last Pynchon monograph, of note for its strong assertion of philosophical idealism at the heart of Pynchon's writing, is most welcome. There are a few problematic elements of this chapter, though, particularly the bluntness of the assertion, and others like it, that “from *V.* to *Gravity's Rainbow* the author seems to move towards a stronger realization that Germany does not have a monopoly on racism and genocide” (74). It could be argued, as Cowart suggests somewhat too gently, that Pynchon has never held with the idea of a specific nationality possessing a coherent set of shared attributes and that his is, as Sascha Pöhlmann's recent book puts it, a postnational imagination.

Such critiques aside, when Cowart turns to the 1960s, the focal epicentre of Pynchon's writing, the quality of analysis is maintained. Be it in parallels to Updike's *Rabbit*, *Forrest Gump* or Pynchon himself (p. 90), the chronicle is one, as with the transatlantic subsumption of German culture, of innocence to experience, “his country's maturation, its putting away of childish things” (p. 93). It is

also, though, Pynchon's own maturation, embodied here in Cowart's notion of attenuated postmodernism, a mode moving between modernist mythopoesis and postmodern deconstruction of those same myths, a mode in which a committed literature is nevertheless aesthetically rescued “from the realm of propaganda and didacticism” (p. 121).

As is perhaps inevitable, portions of *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* feel like history repeating itself; many parts of this work have been previously published. This seems most obvious in Cowart's chapter on *Mason & Dixon*, “The Luddite Vision”. In article form, this piece was a self-contained, coherent unit and it remains an excellent piece of scholarship. So while it would be unfair to say that it is completely out of place here, it does feel as though a greater smoothing of the edges would have resulted in a more complete integration.

If at times, then, this volume feels a little disjointed, the reader will find ample recompense in Cowart's closing career retrospective, “The Historiographer Historicized”. Reflecting on canonicity, prescience and aesthetic merit, Cowart deftly appraises Pynchon as a historical novelist through a broad repertoire of reference, from Eliot to Aristotle, building upon these themes from *The Art of Allusion*. Particularly of note to those entering scholarly work on Pynchon, this section also subtextually traces the history of Pynchon criticism, from gnostic, through Menippean, to encyclopaedic and theoretical approaches and far beyond. Furthermore, while Cowart acknowledges that Pynchon's long-term reputation will hinge on more than favourable critical appraisals, the formidable list of those authors who can be situated in his lineage already bodes well (pp. 205-206).

As someone who works, day-in, day-out on Pynchon's fiction – a task that is alternately a pleasure and a trial – perhaps the best accolade that I can bestow on Cowart's work is that it swung me from a trial, into a pleasurable intellectual excitement. Cowart's accomplished book is exciting and fresh,

reminding us, once again, that the works of Thomas Pynchon deserve to remain elevated, that they are stunning, even the foremost, specimens of American literature and historical fiction.

For those who find Cowart's thesis statement of Pynchon as the greatest American historical novelist too broad for their tastes, though, it could be that Simon de Bourcier's exploration of relativity and, primarily, Pynchon's post-*Mason & Dixon* work is just what is needed. Do not let it be said that Pynchon studies doesn't cater for everybody! Although explicitly situated in a lineage from N. Katherine Hayles' *The Cosmic Web* [1984] in terms of its tight thematic focus within Pynchon studies, de Bourcier's book is more clearly descended from Mark Currie's rigorous exploration of fiction and temporality in *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* [2007] and it is fair to say that *Pynchon and Relativity* shares many of the permuting, iterative examinations of time structures and narrative layering found in this earlier volume. Indeed, in line with Currie's work, the opening chapter here is dauntingly theoretical, bombarding the reader with the full range found in Currie and beyond, across physics and philosophy, from Einstein to Minkowski, Plato to Cleanthes, Prigogine to Čapek, Gödel to Bergson, A-series to B-series time, Ricoeur and Mitchell, until Kermode and Derrida feel like light relief.

This structural setup is necessary and could easily be forgiven were de Bourcier to instantly re-situate these generalized theories inside fictional narrative. However, the style remains densely esoteric and more akin to a history of science; for instance, the discussion of Vaihinger in relation to Zeno, Robin Le Poidevin and James Thomson (51). While I suspect this can be blamed upon the inherent difficulty in giving a brief history of time, or an accessible summary of any philosophico-scientific intersection, *Pynchon and Relativity* feels, for its first half, like an exercise in deferral; held up on a future promise. The promise takes a long time to come off, though. While the dialogue de Bourcier introduces with Conrad and Ford's *The Inheritors* provides a productive intertext, far too much time is spent, not upon the purported object of study, but elsewhere by this

point.

When he does, finally, move to a more concrete grounding in Pynchon's fiction, though, de Bourcier shows the ways in which *Against the Day* works in a similar “approach and avoid” style to earlier novels such as *Gravity's Rainbow* with elegance and flair. Presenting compelling evidence that Pynchon allows the scientific history that remains behind the text to “sit just out sight” (133), *Pynchon and Relativity* really gets going with the discussion on Aether. This chapter is especially interesting for its solid grasp of the fact that Michelson's experiments were only conceived post-Einstein as validating relativity and the camouflaged ways in which Pynchon integrates this into his novel; surely also of note for those studies still interested in the historiographic nature of these works. Indeed, as de Bourcier puts it: “Scientific ideas are used by contemporary novelists both in the creation of characters who are themselves scientists and as metaphors for other aspects of human experience” (153) and this also works, as a strength of *Pynchon and Relativity*, on the structural level.

Furthermore, *Pynchon and Relativity* begins to posit, beneath all the referential tracking, an exciting theoretical departure. It seems that it is possible, according to de Bourcier, to identify multiple worlds, or frames, within Pynchon's works. Some of these are explicitly pre-Relativistic, some post-Relativistic. However, as with, for instance, the metaleptic folding of the “Ghastly Fop” subplot in *Mason & Dixon*, it is not always clear that these worlds are delineated. For de Bourcier, it is the coexistence of, and interaction between, these incompatible worlds that delineates Pynchon's postmodernist literary practice from modernist accounts of Relativity, rather than Brian McHale's well-known conception of a shift of dominant. In *Pynchon and Relativity*, it is not a heterotopia that is given, but *Against the Day* as a universe of heterotopias.

*Pynchon and Relativity* also presents a strong case for narratology as a methodology in Pynchon

studies, noting the many instances in which time is spatialized in *Mason & Dixon*. It does not, however, see this as the only valid form of analysis and de Bourcier's work appears strongest when it reconnects its high theorizing with thematic and social issues already engaged within Pynchon's critical canon, such as clock time and social control (169). Perhaps the most striking conclusion from the work, though, is the notion that Pynchon's fiction examines how historical reality, at its lived moment, was constituted by now-outmoded theories, but that once new world theories are established, they appear as though they stood for truth across all time (186).

If a problem could be identified with *Pynchon and Relativity*, then, it would certainly not be the persuasive conclusions, original argumentation and attention to detail that the author bestows upon Pynchon's novels. It would instead be structural; it takes too long to begin, too long to arrive at those conclusions, arguments and detail. This is, of course, a peril of such interdisciplinary work. It also cannot be asserted that the theoretical material is uninteresting; far from it. The problem, in fact, seems to be purely one of marketing; should not the title have been *Relativity and Pynchon*? For those working upon Pynchon in a broader frame, chapters four to eight are excellent. For those looking for rigorous scholarship on, and exemplary application of, Relativity and time with regard to Pynchon's fiction, chapters one to three. With this prerequisite condition, it is then easy to say that the work in this volume is excellent.

These two very different works bring to the fore the diversity and excitement that theoretical work on the novels of Thomas Pynchon still brings. Indeed, the range of material that continues to be published seems to confirm the upward trajectory of Pynchon scholarship, with no potential *brennschluss* in sight. Regardless of whether Pynchon publishes another book, makes a surprise public appearance or continues his silence, the professors will be kept busy (in a less cynical mode than Joyce's), working together, for a while yet to come.

Martin Paul Eve

